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SUBJECT: GOMA UPDATE: OPENING FOR POLITICAL TALKS?

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Alpha Sow of MONUC reported to the International Facilitation (IF) October 23 that FARDC's Admiral Etumba had told him that the GDRC would like to start serious operations against the FDLR. Etumba also reportedly said the GDRC was open to political talks with the CNDP. Colonel Cunliffe of MONUC outlined his frustration with the FARDC. The IF will follow up with Etumba on the evening of October 23 and, depending on the outcome of the discussion, the IF will then approach the CNDP to ascertain the group's willingness to engage at a political level with the GDRC. It is too early to make too much of Etumba's announcements. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) At the October 23 meeting of the International Facilitation (IF) in Goma, MONUC political advisor Alpha Sow reported that FARDC's Admiral Didier Etumba had delivered to him the following points/questions:

-- The GDRC remains committed to peace.

-- How much longer must we (FARDC) wait before taking tough actions against the CNDP, moving to the 'compel phase' as per the separation plan?

-- The GDRC would like to restart serious operations against the FDLR, which would include arresting FDLR figures in Goma, opening the Rutshuru-Ishasha road, and increasing operations in Walikale.

-- The GDRC is open to political talks with the CNDP, even before military talks. The government, however, insists that this be done quietly and that these talks should not appear to be outside of the Amani process.

¶3. (SBU) Sow interpreted Etumba's point on operations against the FDLR as a criticism of MONUC, questioning why it had not moved faster on Operation Kimia. It appeared that Etumba was blaming MONUC for not moving against the FDLR. Nevertheless, Sow later confirmed that Etumba had agreed that the FARDC would be willing to recommence serious actions against the FDLR.

¶4. (SBU) MONUC's Colonel Cunliffe expressed frustration with what Etumba had said, outlining the following areas in which the FARDC was being unhelpful:

-- The Comprehensive Disengagement Plan, accepted by the GDRC, required cantonment of the FARDC. This has not happened. Instead the FARDC attacked the CNDP. Thus after 30 days, the plan is only 40% complete.

-- The national police (PNC) were supposed to deploy into the Zones of Separation. None have been deployed nor is there a support structure in place for this deployment.

-- Ten FARDC battalions, approximately 8,000 men who were being

prepared for Operation Kimia, have instead been targeted against CNDP.

-- The only joint operation against FDLR (reftel), at Mpofi, foresaw the use of one FARDC company (100 men); however, only 13 FARDC soldiers showed up. The three possible anti-FDLR operations suggested by Etumba were actually operations that Cunliffe himself had recommended to General Kayembe.

-- When MONUC deploys to a flashpoint, its soldiers are attacked by the public, despite the FARDC presence, as at Kalengera on October 12. Also, FARDC places its vehicles next to MONUC facilities during combat, recently resulting in 5 Uruguayan vehicles being destroyed at Ntamagenga.

15. (SBU) The IF will meet with Etumba the evening of October 23 to press the following points: the GDRC/FARDC must respect the ceasefire, execute the disengagement plan, garrison its soldiers, deploy the PNC, and return the Kimia battalions to operations against the FDLR. The idea is to elicit Etumba's agreement to move forward and demonstrate the GDRC's good faith and willingness to talk seriously with the CNDP. The IF will also promise Etumba that MONUC would police the zones of separation to prevent any violations by the CNDP.

16. (SBU) After speaking with Etumba, the IF will approach the CNDP to gauge their willingness to talk. Issues that remain outstanding include: who from the GDRC the CNDP would consider as an interlocutor; where a meeting could be held; and what precisely would be discussed.

KINSHASA 00000922 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) Comment: Some observers believe Etumba's statements may signal that senior Congolese leaders have decided to adopt a more long-term view of ending the conflict in the east by favoring a political settlement, hoping to secure a peace dividend in the Kivus prior to the next presidential election. Under this scenario a serious military campaign against the FDLR would provide leverage vis-a-vis the CNDP, whose pretext for continuing the struggle would be undermined. We believe it is too early to know what, if anything, will result from today's surprising developments. End comment.

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